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ON PAGE A-2

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Nicaragua is focus of increasing tensions in Central America

Sandinistas expect assault by Honduras

By Julia Preston
Special to The Sun

Managua, Nicaragua—Nicaragua's Sandinista regime is becoming convinced that war with its northern neighbor, Honduras, is approaching as a result of the Reagan administration's policies in Central America.

Commander Daniel Ortega, head of the governing junta and a member of the nine-man leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, said in an interview last week, "As long as the United States wants to provoke this war, it is practically impossible to avoid it."

"The facts indicate to us that the American policy in Central America is designed to provoke a large-scale military aggression against Nicaragua in the short term," he charged.

Commander Ortega said the Sandinistas fear military attack from both the Honduran army and former members of the Nicaraguan national guard, ousted with the late dictator Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979. There is substantial evidence that these "Somocistas" are operating out of camps inside Honduras along the border with Nicaragua.

"We are expecting an Honduran attack by air and by land," Commander Ortega said.

"We have received intelligence reports that the United States CIA has activated an old plan for the Honduran border area, to initiate the attack against us. By this plan, former Nicaraguan guardsmen dressed as Sandinista soldiers will seize one or more towns inside Honduras. That will bring what we believe will be primarily an airborne attack on Nicaragua by Honduras."

The Honduran military has the most sophisticated air force in Central America.

"At the same time, the guardsmen would move massively into Nicaraguan territory," the commander continued, "while the Honduran army covers their rear guard."

His statements reflect a broad sense among both the Sandinista leadership and many Nicaraguan civilians of looming military conflict and continued pressure from the United States on the Sandinista regime.

Since July a new factor has exacerbated the Sandinistas' siege mentality. They now believe they are facing a force of about 2,500 armed "counter-revolutionaries," or "contras," inside Nicaragua. In addition, the army believes there are 3,500 contras inside Honduras.

Sandinista army intelligence recently has identified 20 different zones inside Nicaragua and 8 camps inside Honduras where contras have military bases.

These allegations emerged from a recent briefing with the official spokesman for the Sandinista army, Roberto Sanchez. He described a series of battles since early July between Sandinista troops and contra forces that took place on Nicaragua's remote Atlantic coast.

Mr. Sanchez said the battles indicated that in the last four months the contras have undergone a "clear improvement in the type of arms they carry and their level of organization."

Mr. Sanchez said the Sandinistas suffered an "important military setback" at the town of Seventh Bank near the Atlantic Ocean 60 miles south of the border with Honduras in the first days of July. Fifteen Sandinista soldiers and 25 civilians were killed by a force of 100 contras, he said. Since then, there have been nine other battles in the area, leaving 28 Sandinista soldiers and 136 contras dead, he added.

"We believe they are no longer acting on their own. The evidence is since May they must be receiving some outside armed support."

Mr. Sanchez stopped short of directly accusing the United States of supporting the recent contra campaign, but he did assert direct Honduran military involvement. "It is not an official policy of the Honduran government," he said. "But we have evidence that officers of the Honduran military and civilian politicians are aiding the Nicaraguan contras."

In the past two weeks reporters have not been allowed to travel along the Atlantic coast to verify the Sandinistas' accounts. However, Mr. Sanchez's description of the recent battles was verified by a Sandinista named Raul Guerra who fought in several of them as a member of the army reserve.

Responding to what they see as an imminent threat to the set of reforms they refer to as "The Revolution," the Sandinistas are promoting a wide military mobilization, favoring the type of civilian militias and part-time troops that were the decisive factor in their 1979 victory over General Somoza's national guard.

The Sandinista army consists of about 20,000 permanent soldiers, both men and women. In addition, another 25,000 members of the army reserve are called up for three months at a time after one month of training. A further 80,000 receive sporadic training as militias.

All members of the Sandinista military are volunteers. This month some

30,000 militiamen can be seen in empty lots and baseball fields throughout the country straining to complete their quota of pushups and to understand special instructions in tactics.

In the last three years, the Sandinistas also have purchased Soviet tanks and reequipped their infantry with Soviet automatic rifles. They have publicized requests to buy Russian MiG fighter jets. But a well-informed Western observer here said that the MiGs have not arrived and there is no sign that they are coming soon.

The large number of Nicaraguans wearing olive green full- or part-time has drawn charges from other Central American countries, including Honduras, that the Nicaraguans are engaging in an unnecessary arms race.